

THE WAGON'S HORROR

By Ben Ames Williams.

No railroad touched the village. It was one of those little communities so common in the New England hills; a cluster of white houses, a store or two, a few white spire-roofed barns above the trees. There was a milldam just above the bridge; and the mill itself squatted in a litter of piled lumber, barrel heads and staves, soft edgings, slabs and sawdust. In the brook that meandered through the meadow above the dam you might discover deep little pools and take from their trout of a surprising length and girth and saw, as you clean, well-scaled, fragrant, happy little villages—worth knowing. Its name dated it; it was called Fraternity Village, thus to be distinguished from North Fraternity, and East Fraternity, and Centre Fraternity, and other fraternalities, for all I know. Its neighboring towns included Liberty and Equality, and Union, and Freedom. All cut from the same pattern; their villages each as like as like, some with six houses, some with a dozen, some with a score; each with its white church and white spire rising in a certain peaceful glory above the trees. To top one of the surrounding hills and look down upon such a village was to take deep breath and be thankful for the land in which you dwelt.

No railroad touched the town. This has been said before, but bears repeating; for it is a fact of some significance, as though you said of a man: "He has no car, and he is poor." In default of a railroad there was a stage. Two stages was an automobile just two weeks ago and a rattle across the road at noon or early evening, fetching the mail, and sometimes a passenger or two. The mail, a lump gray sack, was deposited at the post office; the stage rattled on.

The post office was in Will Bissell's store. Will Bissell's store was unremarkable; as like a thousand counterparts as Fraternity was like a thousand other villages. It was a little country store, and nothing more than that.

This estimate of Will's store, however, was not at all in accord with the ideas of Andy Wattles.

Andy Wattles was Will Bissell's clerk—a tall, thin, gaunting fellow with a long, thin nose and a thin mustache. He may have been nineteen or twenty or twenty-one, but whatever he was he looked like a man. One felt that he had not long enough to work upon him. His eyes and his front teeth and his Adam's apple all stuck out distressingly, as though they needed to be ground down; and his feet and hands were too large. He would have grown to fit them. He was a fair, brittle fellow, about Andy. You might have expected him to break as easily as a pipstems; but he had, in spite of this appearance, the stringy strength of a country boy who has used all his muscles all his life.

Andy pointed at the store with an expression in his pale eyes. There was a good deal of the boy in Andy; and he looked up at Andy, saw who it was, and winked at Luke Hill and enlarged the tale. He was not sure, he said, whether they were cats or lynxes. Or maybe catamounts.

Will Bissell told Andy soberly: "You want to look out when you go through the swamp, Andy. Watch the trees, and see to it that you don't drop on 'em."

Andy asked Motley uncertainly: "You think they—jump a man?"

His obvious uneasiness delivered Andy bound into the hands of the Philistines. If he had been alone with Motley the farmer would have reassured him and heartened him. So would any man and woman in the presence of the others prompted Motley to have sport. Andy's very teeth were set on edge with the matter of minutes. Others joined Motley in the sport. When Andy went out at last to lead his wagon Jean Bubler Oliver and screamed in his

store, packing up bacon and beans and flour and feed to be taken over Enoch Thomas, in North Fraternity. They would have to go over tonight. Ordinarily Will did little delivering, and that by day alone, but Enoch was an ancient customer, and a good one, and he was accustomed to demand and to receive consideration. Will had promised the things that night, and Andy would drive over with them before he went to bed. For the sake of his pride in the store he would not let Enoch refuse him; and he was not at all disinclined to the thought of that trip. Much of the way lay through the Whitcher swamp, and that was a gloomy place by day, and worse in darkness. Andy was—put it kindly—a timid boy. Some rough-tongued folk in Fraternity used a harsher word.

The talk that went back and forth about the store the evening before had calculated to reassure him. Luke Hills had seen a bull moose in the road through the swamp, and that was a telling tale, already thrice told, to some new arrival. "Big as a horse, the critter was," Luke declared. "And the horns on his head six feet across."

Old man Varney sighed incredulously, and said: "You 'magine it, Luke. Never was any moose hereabouts when I was younger. Where'd they come from now?"

"I didn't imagine them tracks of his," Luke insisted, stubbornly; and Andy, wide-eyed, asked: "What's Luke's about?"

"I didn't figure I had any appointment with a bull moose," old flivver, on its two hind wheels and come back out of there."

Jean Bubler laughed his scornful laugh. "You should have hit him with a little switch," he said. "He will not hurt you. He has my chicken, moose, and bull moose. It is—"

He snapped his fingers lightly. "Nothing at all," he said.

Andy appealed to Jim Saladine, a mighty hunter before the Lord, and Saladine said, slowly: "I'll argue with you, but I won't let me a thirty-thirty. No other way."

Then some one told how a cow moose had chased a horse and buggy half a mile that spring; another remembered the bull that had treed a man the fall before. Tale followed tale. Lee Motley came in and told them that there were wildcats in Whitcher swamp. That was a matter that more nearly concerned them all.

A moose will steal a little pasture, perhaps; but a wildcat may take a ham, or a lamb, or even a piglet. If the signs are right, "Heard 'em two nights ago," said Motley. "And last night they come up, crack at one. You could hear 'em spitting and squawling half a mile into the swamp."

Andy shivered at that and came toward the stove with a side of bacon in one hand and the paper that would wrap it in the other. "Wildcats," he asked, quaveringly.

"Eh?" Motley ejaculated; and he looked up at Andy, saw who it was, and winked at Luke Hill and enlarged the tale. He was not sure, he said, whether they were cats or lynxes. Or maybe catamounts.

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might be. But it was characteristic of Andy that he had no thought of turning back, giving up his errand at once. He was on duty; he must press on.

Motley's dog came running out to bark at him when he reached the farm. Andy knew the dog and spoke to him, and the beast leaped joyfully toward him, and followed him to the wagon—after Andy had climbed to the seat—as far as the brow of the hill. Andy stopped the dog, and the dog went reluctantly. Andy was reluctant to see him go, but he had no choice. He had been good company through the swamp. But Motley wanted his dog to stay at home.

When the dog was gone Andy felt utterly alone. He got out and stood beside the wagon, where the road dipped down, and looked over the north and west across the wide valley where the swamp lay. There was beauty in the scene. The sun had been of sight a quarter of an hour before.

Above the hills where it had disappeared a rosy fan of color was spreading over the blue of the sky, with pink to the very zenith. The blue shadows of dusk were creeping across the world. The hills across the valley, against the evening glow of the sunset, were deep purple, a splendid color like a chord of music. That color seemed to sing in the air; and Andy trembled in it. All the distant, secret hills were purple; those nearer were blue. Yet through this blue the dark green of the pines and the lighter green of birch tops appeared distinctly. To the north, above the swamp, Sebacoak pond was a lake of blue silver. The world was unutterably still. No air stirred. From the chimney of a farm to the south light smoke rose straight up in a feathery column. A crow lowed in Motley's barn. Four crows came within the valley. Above the swamp, silent and furtive as they sped toward their roosting place. They saw Andy on the hill, and veered away from him and buzzed on a bird in a bush beside the road, sang a broken little song drowsily, and at last was still.

Andy paid no great heed to all this beauty. He looked long at the swamp, his pine tops black below him. For minutes he delayed there, staring down into the valley, but in the end he climbed to his seat with a sudden, remembering half, and clucked to the horse.

Git on," he said huskily.

The horse started down the hill, picking a careful way; for the road was steep and rocky littered it, and ledges broke its surface. Andy kept the reins in his hand. His eyes were in the swamp, which seemed to rise to engulf him. He had the power of a boy to conjure up imaginative terrors, and he was very thoroughly afraid.

The road led at first through Motley's deep meadow. They were bare and stubby now; their hay was stored in Motley's barn. Below them Andy saw a section of scrubby alder growth, where woodcock pond, in the fall flights. The native birds nested there, and in the growing dusk one flushed from the road just under the horse's feet, where it had been probing beside a puddle for worms. The whistle of its wings started Andy; his hair crawled under his hat.

He saw, only a little ahead, the sentinel pine that marked the entrance to the swamp, and when he reached it he clucked more sharply to the horse and plunged down a short dip to the level of the swamp road. The trees closed about him, their branches seemed to reach toward each other above his head, as though to shut away the light of day. It was as though he drove through a deep crevice in the solid earth, the sky shining high above; and Andy felt the swamp rising in him from

rest upon his back. This was as new for Andy, since it had lain upon his face in the soft ooze and water, he would infallibly have smothered or drowned. As it was, he could not but brush and logs had been posed with the first hint of returning consciousness that he was drowned, for he was half buried in water and came up with a gasp, his feet were clogged on roots or stones. There was a stab that stabbed him in the back, and the result of this was, he twisted under his body; and it ached with cold. There was water in his ears.

He came back to life very slowly. Consciousness centered, at first, in the throbbing lump on his head. The world, for Andy, was one great pulsing pain. When his sensations became more distinct he felt the pricking torture of his twisted and constricted arms, and a little later—he had not yet mustered strength to move—he knew that something was hurting his back, and that his sides were sore. Wermuth's toe had splintered a rib in his right side, but Andy did not know this till Dr. Frost went over him, next day.

After a certain length of time he opened his eyes. He could see nothing whatever, and for a little he was not sure that his eyes were open. He blinked them with scrupulous care, shutting them tight and opening them quickly. The blackness persisted.

Then a little flash of recollection came to him, paralyzing memory. He sat up jerkily and something turned under his hand in the mud. He found a frog, like a snake. Andy leaped away from it to his feet, to one side, and fell flat on his face across the hard surface of the road. The fall dazed him, blinded him with the light of a thousand constellations. He got dizzily to his feet, legs spread, hands out, staring this way and that, and he became conscious of the swamp all about him, and crouched on his hunkers on the road, with a curiously blank expression on his face, and as inconspicuous as possible.

It was a misty night, a black night, and Andy was alone. In a flash, a stood a dozen feet away, yet his fear

made him feel naked before the eyes of unnamed and terrible things. He gave himself up, for a little, to a trembling or of fear.

He was still, it should be understood, dazed and uncertain just what had happened, but while he crouched in the road memory crept back to him and amplified that first ghost of recollection. He remembered that he had been driving Will's wagon, that men had stopped him, struck him. The wagon had been driven off the road in the dark, forgot to crutch, moved here and there, searching, along the road. The wagon was gone.

WHERE WILL'S store was concerned there was a stiffness in Andy—as Jean Bubler and others had cause to know. This stiffness showed itself now. If there had been light you might have seen his face go pale beneath its blood and mire. You might have seen him stand rigidly in the darkness, listening with all his ears, frozen to stone, trembling with fear, and trembling also with an honest dread of the dark. He remembered that he had been driving Will's wagon, that men had stopped him, struck him. The wagon had been driven off the road in the dark, forgot to crutch, moved here and there, searching, along the road. The wagon was gone.

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